

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 37, February 2017

Preparations for the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb

The Universal House of Justice has indicated, in a letter dated 18 May 2016 written on its behalf to all National Spiritual Assemblies, that the locus of activity for the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh in 2017 and of the Birth of the Báb in 2019 will be at the local level. These celebrations present “special opportunities for the friends to reach out to the widest possible cross-section of society and to all those with whom they share a connection—whether through a family tie or common interest, an occupation or field of study, neighbourly relations or merely chance acquaintance—so that all may rejoice in the appearance, exactly two hundred years before, of One Who was to be the Bearer of a new Message for humankind”.¹

The letter further highlights that “the most distinguishing feature of these bicentenaries will be a tremendous flourishing of activity by Bahá'ís and their friends in local communities”.² Each bicentenary celebration bears the immense potential to “kindle a spirit of faithful endeavour that will permeate all the noble undertakings of the friends”.³

Communities around the world are engaged in preparations for these special days and are consulting on how to imbue them with “a sense of what it means for humanity that these two Luminaries rose successively above the horizon of the world”.⁴ This process has spurred the believers into action towards achieving the goals of the Five Year Plan. Their aim is to significantly increase the number of friends participating in the community-building process, encouraging each one of them to invite others to join in celebrating the lives of the Twin Manifestations. In some places, the believers already began to apply the guidance from the House of Justice in the celebrations of the Twin Holy Days in November 2016. This issue of *Reflections on Growth* shares a few stories taken from reports received, describing such experiences.

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The following two accounts from North America and Europe demonstrate how plans and preparations of the community leading up to the bicentenary celebrations are unfolding in light of the following guidance from the Universal House of Justice: “There is ... every reason to expect that the emphasis given to commemorating these Holy Days will have a considerable and cumulative impact on the work of raising vibrant communities.”⁵ The first story describes how a Local Spiritual Assembly, together with other institutions and agencies, has developed and put into action plans for the cycles leading up to the celebrations. The second story is about a community-wide gathering that inspired the friends to make a collective pledge to converse with a large number of people about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh.

Canada

Over several cycles in different parts of the country, institutions and agencies in **Canada** reflected on the idea that in all the efforts of the friends, including the observance of Holy Days, there is an opportunity to bring more people into contact with the lives of the Central Figures of the Faith and into the community-building process in a way that expresses in action the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. The friends have been learning how to make lists of people they know and to invite them to Holy Day celebrations and core activities. Inspired by the example of the

inauguration of the Mother Temple of South America in October 2016, where the National Spiritual Assembly of **Chile** invited each of the 5,000 participants to converse with 10 local inhabitants on matters of spiritual import, the believers in Canada also started thinking about each setting a goal to engage in conversations with and invite 10 people to join in the efforts of the community. The following account is based on a report about a consultation between the Local Spiritual Assembly of **Calgary, Alberta**, and members of other institutions, illustrating how the believers applied this idea to their reality.

When thinking about the bicentenary celebrations, we realized that these events would be opportunities to engage a growing number of people in an ongoing conversation about the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The first thought that came to our mind was to involve all the believers in the community and the couple of hundred friends of the Faith participating in core activities.

As we started making lists of friends, we counted some 1,000 individuals who are in one way or another participating in the activities of the Bahá'í community. We asked ourselves: "What if each of these 1,000 friends makes a list of 10 people to reach out to every three months leading up to the first bicentenary celebration?" And then we thought: "What if each of those newly found friends could then be inspired to do the same?" The possibility of introducing tens of thousands of people to the Person of Bahá'u'lláh brought us tremendous joy as we realized that the friends who are participating in the core activities can themselves be protagonists and through them many more people can be engaged.

It was also clear to us that, as the conversations in the local communities unfolded, it would be useful to remove any obstacles in our minds and consider ways to keep expanding our vision. For example, instead of visualizing one large Holy Day celebration that would accommodate thousands of people in one location, we could consider having many local events. Since a meeting with the friends serving the cluster and its sectors had been planned for that evening, we were excited to share these insights with them.

During the same day, an institutional meeting for the **Alberta** region was in session. Having heard about the result of the consultation with the Local Assembly in Calgary, the friends at this meeting were inspired to share these insights with every community in the region.

That evening in Calgary, the friends committed to bringing the vision to as many believers as possible that week, making lists of friends to visit immediately. The Twin Birthdays in November 2016 saw an increase in the number of people participating, and a total of 14 local celebrations were held. Through this experience more believers felt moved to take action and develop a personal teaching plan. Now they were able to reflect on how this growing number of celebrations and new people participating can lead to opportunities to enter into conversations about the Faith.

Kosovo

During a two-day national gathering in **Kosovo**, the friends were inspired to make plans for the forthcoming bicentenary celebrations in the context of their goals for the Five Year Plan. The following experience was shared by one of the participants:

Almost 40 friends attended, including friends of the Faith and a few visitors from **Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia**. Just about everyone contributed in one way or another! During one of the evenings, we were all uplifted by a programme that included a beautiful monologue presented on the life of the first Albanian believer—which moved many to tears—two enchanting poems of Táhírih read in Albanian, traditional dances involving all generations, and video recordings of some of the first Kosovan believers recalling how they found the Faith in the aftermath of the 1998–1999 war.

The highlight of the gathering was on the second day, when we pledged a goal to the Blessed Beauty, to be fulfilled before the bicentenary celebration of His Birth: every one of us will have meaningful conversations with at least 95 people and share a prayer book with each of them. We thus hope to mention the Name of Bahá'u'lláh to at least 2,850 souls over the next three cycles of activity. We also expressed the desire to celebrate the historic bicentenary celebrations of the Twin Birthdays in each and every community.

The gathering sparked great joy and rekindled the spirit of community. The members of one family were so inspired that they declared that the Bahá'í spirit had lit up their home like never before. Another friend pledged to dedicate more time to service. No matter how few we are, we can create an atmosphere filled with the spirit of a large gathering that infuses our hearts with love and gratitude for our beloved Faith.

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*The following accounts from communities in South Asia and Africa illustrate how the preparations for and celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays in 2016 set the stage for the planning of the anniversaries in 2017 and 2019. The collection of stories from India describes how friends found creative ways to organize these Festivals and learn about reaching out to a large circle of people, including families, participants in core activities, government officials, and contacts in the media. The story from Tanzania is about how the cluster agencies and institutions viewed the 2016 celebrations as an opportunity to engage everyone in preparing for the bicentenary celebrations, aiming for a “flourishing of activity by Bahá'ís and their friends in local communities”.*⁶

India

Across India, excitement grew when groups of friends studied the 18 May 2016 letter regarding the bicentenary celebrations and explored “the manner in which these highly significant Festivals are to be celebrated”.⁷ The accounts below are from four regions: Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Goa, and Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Elements of the preparations

As the friends reflected on the preparations for these special occasions, great attention was given to how to extend invitations to waves of new people during every cycle of activity, engage them in conversations about the Twin Manifestations, and through these efforts build a flourishing and ever-expanding community leading up to the bicentenary celebrations.

In Hanuman Nagar, a neighbourhood in the **Sangli** cluster of **Maharashtra**, teams were formed among children's class teachers and animators, along with some junior youth, to visit homes from morning to evening, sharing with the families stories of the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and the importance of Their Mission and Teachings. Some 465 homes on 7 streets were visited. The teams would gather every day after their visits to reflect on their experiences and consult on ways in which they could further enhance the systematization of the home visits and the invitations to the Holy Day celebrations.

In other places, school-aged children prepared and shared with their classes presentations on the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. In a neighbourhood in the **Kalyan-Dombivli** cluster in **Maharashtra**, 15 schools were visited to speak about the Bahá'í Faith, and students were invited to write essays about the life of the Blessed Beauty.

In Bapugandhi Nagar, one of the neighbourhoods in the **Indore** cluster in **Madhya Pradesh**, the believers decided to invite to the celebrations the families of all the participants involved in the community-building activities. The friends explained:

We identified 60 families to invite to the celebrations. These were all families of participants of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. We prepared handmade invitations and distributed them together with a wonderfully decorated lamp. We divided into teams and visited the homes one by one, sharing stories of the lives of the Twin Manifestations and presenting the invitations. These families were also asked to identify a time on 2 November to host a devotional meeting in honour of the Blessed Beauty.

In the Sivanthangal neighbourhood of the **Chennai** cluster in **Tamil Nadu**, the friends visited every home and extended the invitation in a way that expressed the significance of the events. They also invited local government officials and dignitaries. The following account illustrates the approach they took:

In the traditional way of our culture, we prepared beautifully adorned plates with sweets and flowers to carry invitation cards, and this profoundly touched the hearts. In some instances, those who were visited took off their shoes out of respect and in order to receive the invitation in a befitting manner. When inviting government officials and dignitaries, we presented them with introductory literature about the Faith, shared with them the nature and purpose of the Holy Day celebrations, and spoke about the ongoing community-building activities.

The friends described how they worked in teams to prepare for the special celebrations and the wholehearted response they received from the community.

We had two teams of friends, in constant communication, working together for the celebrations. One team focused on the logistical preparations, and the other on the invitations and the programme. Daily home visits were carried out, nurturing a great deal of enthusiasm among all involved. Many of the Bahá'í families supported the celebrations, occasionally with in-kind or cash contributions, to the extent that the entire programme was self-sufficient. Some of the local officials also offered assistance in the form of a gathering space, a large tent, and gifts for the youth and children.

Reaching out to the wider community using various media

In order to reach out to the wider community and attract public attention, the friends used various forms of media.

In the **Tirur** cluster in **Kerala**, two communities decided to join their efforts in celebrating the Twin Holy Birthdays, and preparations were made to advertise the events widely on local television. In addition, the Local Spiritual Assembly broadcasted greetings on the local channel for a period of 15 days before the celebrations took place.

In some communities, before and during the Holy Day celebrations, the attention of the public was drawn by placing large banners in public squares, distributing flyers and brochures, and releasing news stories in local papers.

Elements of the celebrations

Throughout the country, the programme for the celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays included stories on the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and presentations by children and junior youth on what they were learning in their educational activities. The number of participants in core activities increased considerably in many places.

The celebrations of the Twin Holy Birthdays started at 3:00 p.m. in the village of Kanni Koil in **Bahoor** cluster in **Tamil Nadu**. The friends described the details of the event:

The members of the Local Spiritual Assembly and a few friends from the wider community were invited to light a lamp to inaugurate the celebrations, after which we offered prayers to mark the occasion. A presentation with stories of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh brought meaning and significance to the gathering. We then enjoyed a beautiful cake that was cut and shared with everyone.

After this more formal part of the celebrations, the junior youth presented dance performances and dramas based on themes they had studied in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. They also talked about their experiences in junior youth groups and encouraged children to join children's classes. They invited everyone to join in the preparations for the bicentenary celebrations in 2017 and 2019. During this special event, plans were also made to bring the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation to a neighbouring community and initiate a process of growth in that village.

In the **Ujjain** cluster in **Madhya Pradesh**, a festival was organized in accordance with local customs. As in previous years, the friends walked through the village singing Bahá'í songs, bearing 19 torches to light the way. The walk was concluded with a gathering, which included prayers, a presentation on the life of Bahá'u'lláh, and refreshments.

In the **Indore** cluster in the same region, the celebrations included a festive evening and a day of devotions dedicated to the Twin Manifestations. The friends related the sequence of events:

During the evening of 31 October, we held the celebration in a hall beautifully decorated by the youth of the neighbourhood. The programme included presentations on the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, prayers, songs, and cultural dances. The festive celebration concluded with dinner.

On 2 November, the doors of 21 homes were opened wide to let in friends, neighbours, and acquaintances for prayers to remember the Birth of those two bright Luminaries. All day long, from 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night, one devotional gathering after another was held, in home after home, like lights strung along a ribbon.

On the first day of the celebrations, the friends in Hanuman Nagar in the **Sangli** cluster of **Maharashtra** gathered for prayers at dawn. People in the neighbourhood observed how the children's class teachers, junior youth group animators, youth, and children were praying together. They were so moved by this that they decided to join the prayers on the second day. Since that time, a pattern has been established for the community to gather weekly for prayers early in the morning. These meetings are now also providing an opportunity to consult on matters related to the well-being of the entire community.

A cultural programme later in the day was attended by over 400 people from some 180 families. Just before the programme started, the venue lost power. Those in attendance waited, while prayers were said, until the problem was resolved. When the electricity was restored, the event began with traditional dances performed by children, followed by stories about the transformation of the community through the friends' participation in the core activities, and an introduction to the Bahá'í Faith. The friends committed themselves to spreading the light of Bahá'u'lláh far and wide across the neighbourhood.

Initiatives dedicated to the Twin Manifestations

The following vignettes show a diversity of initiatives dedicated to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh on the occasion of Their anniversaries.

A few months before the Holy Days, the friends in Manglia in **Madhya Pradesh** decided to raise the number of core activities in their village to 50 as a humble gift to the Twin Manifestations. On 29 October 2016, they were able to achieve this goal.

In the **Badwar** cluster in **Madhya Pradesh**, the believers expressed their devotion by making contributions to the Fund as part of the celebrations.

In the **Kagal** cluster in **Maharashtra**, the friends, in honour of the anniversaries, decided to try to open as many homes as possible to host devotional gatherings. The friends related the following:

In preparation for home visits in the village of Vannur, we studied parts of Ruhi Book 4 to help us talk about the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh with the local residents. In addition to bringing the glad tidings of the coming of the Manifestations of God, we spoke about the importance of prayer as part of the laws of God. These meaningful visits resulted in 50 new devotional gatherings in the village.

We organized the celebrations of the Twin Birthdays at a local school. Before the programme began, Bahá'í prayers were played on speakers and could be heard by the entire village. About 70 people came to the celebrations. The atmosphere that permeated the village was that of love for the Twin Manifestations, and the support that was received from the residents was heart-warming.

Tanzania

After studying the 18 May 2016 message, which notes that “the House of Justice feels it would now be timely to explore further the manner in which these highly significant Festivals are to be celebrated so that preparations can begin to be made”,⁸ the institutions serving the eastern region of **Tanzania** identified localities where celebrations could be held. The friends realized the importance of the role of the Local Spiritual Assembly in supporting the community to plan and organize the events, as well as in encouraging the believers to participate in community activities and Holy Day celebrations as a regular part of their lives. It was also clear that these preparations could be an important part of the efforts towards achieving the goals of the Five Year Plan. As a first step, they decided to distribute the message to all the friends and encourage them to read it in their localities and consult on its implications in relation to the upcoming bicentenaries.

In the **Dar es Salaam** cluster, preparations for the Twin Holy Day celebrations in November 2016 began when, soon after the friends received the 18 May 2016 message, the Local Spiritual Assembly, the Area Teaching Committee, the coordinators of the institute, the Auxiliary Board members, and their assistants all studied the letter. After their study, these friends then gathered together to reflect and plan. The account below describes how their preparations unfolded in light of bringing their goals for the Plan within reach:

We started thinking about everyone who is currently involved in the community-building process. For example, we noted that we have more than 500 junior youth participating in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme with 40 individuals serving as animators, and that we have close relationships with around 150 parents. We set a goal to engage with at least 1,000 junior youth and strengthen bonds of friendship with at least 400 parents. We had a similar discussion about children’s classes. When reflecting on study circles, we realized that we currently have about 10 friends serving as tutors each cycle. So we decided to ensure that at least 20 tutors would be offering institute courses regularly every three months. We also set a goal to have more than 1,000 friends participate in devotional meetings every cycle and to invite new friends to join the Bahá’í community. Since the beginning of the Plan, a beautiful process of welcoming new believers has been in motion.

We then decided to approach the celebrations of the Twin Holy Days in two stages: first, for the 199th anniversary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh, we set the goal to invite 500 to 1,000 people; and second, for the 200th anniversary of His Birth, we planned to invite 1,000 to 2,000 people. The first celebration could be seen as a “rehearsal” for the second one in terms of how to reach as many people as possible in light of the goals of the cluster.

We also started consulting on the following questions: How can we sustain relationships and connections with new friends both before and after the anniversaries? How can we invite people in a way that will yield high participation? How can we encourage, and maximize, participation in not only the Holy Day celebrations but also all other community activities and events? What are the elements of a Holy Day programme that will capture and convey “a sense of what it means for humanity that these two Luminaries rose successively above the horizon of the world”?⁹

The cluster agencies and institutions are closely collaborating, and they appreciate the contribution that members of the community can make individually and collectively. In this cluster, everyone—from children to adult believers, from veteran to newly found friends—is participating and thinking about reaching the widest circle of people possible. To further prepare themselves, the friends in all the localities are drawing inspiration from the deepening themes in Book 2 of the sequence of institute courses and learning to converse about the Twin Manifestations by studying Book 4 on the lives of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

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With the celebration of each Holy Day, the believers in Yemen are gaining experience in inviting friends to and preparing for the upcoming bicentenaries. The following story demonstrates how these momentous occasions can infuse and permeate the hearts with a spiritual energy that spreads out to embrace the wider community.

Yemen

In **Yemen**, the believers, together with their friends and neighbours, gathered to celebrate the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh. The event welcomed many, including youth, children, and their families. One individual who attended was inspired to post this personal account on social media:

Today, my friends and I attended the celebration of a Bahá'í Holy Day in Yemen. This was the first time that it had been held on such a large scale.... It was a simple celebration, but extremely magnificent and wonderful. We were utterly joyful and enveloped with the happiness of a jubilant Holy Day as we watched fledgling young children planting in the gardens of our hearts the seeds of their love for life. They sang, danced, and performed, painting the most wonderful pictures of humanity. It was a day filled with love, in which we got to know a new religious community, the carrier of a mighty message.... We care for its message for humanity and its elevated teachings that sanctify life, work, science, freedom, peace, coexistence, love, cooperation, and gender equality. It also calls for the oneness of an ethnically and religiously diverse humanity based on the principles of justice, equal rights, and the freedom of belief. I wish to learn more and more about the Bahá'í Faith; perchance I can find light in its depths in an age which is enveloped in darkness and is devoid of love and peace.

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¹ Message dated 18 May 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.